

The Dynamics of Competitive Intervention: Multiplicity, Rivalry, and Civil War Duration

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Abstract

Civil wars rarely unfold between two self-contained combatants; they typically draw in multiple external actors whose competing interests complicate the path to settlement. While prior work has established that two-sided interventions prolong conflict, it has largely overlooked the multiplicity of such interventions, and in particular, the distinct relationships that intervening states form with their counterparts on the opposing side. We address this gap by introducing the competitive intervener dyad (CID), a pair of external states simultaneously backing opposing sides, and arguing that a greater number of such dyads prolongs conflicts by compounding both the information and commitment problems that stand between warring parties. Critically, when CIDs are composed of interstate rivals, these bargaining problems deepen significantly, as entrenched suspicion and irreconcilable interests make accurate assessment and credible commitment exceptionally difficult to sustain. Using global data on civil wars from 1975 to 2017, combined with measures of external support and interstate rivalry, we estimate Cox proportional hazards models to test these propositions. The results show that a higher number of CIDs significantly decreases the tendency of civil war to terminate, and that rivalry dyads exert particularly strong prolonging effects, results that hold even after accounting for the total number of interveners and their distribution across opposing camps. These findings demonstrate that what matters for civil war duration is not simply how many states intervene or whether their involvement is competitive, but how intervening states are structurally configured against one another, advancing research on civil war dynamics, third-party intervention, and international rivalry.

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Introduction

Civil wars unfold within an international arena. Foreign states have intervened in 145 of 187 civil war episodes, and in nearly half of these cases, 66 conflicts, both governments and rebel groups received external support (Meier et al., 2023). Existing research shows that these two-sided interventions often prolong civil wars (Regan, 2002; Balch-Lindsay et al., 2008; Aydin & Regan, 2012; Anderson, 2019; Alsaadi, 2023). By shifting the balance of resources and obscuring each side's capabilities and resolve, competitive interventions heighten uncertainty. At the same time, opposing foreign support undermines credible commitments, as the prospect of ongoing arms or financial assistance for both warring groups increases the risk of defection.

Yet civil conflicts with competitive interventions do not all follow the same trajectory. The Republic of the Congo's 1997 conflict, for example, ended in less than a year (Thom, 1999). Rebel forces under Denis Sassou-Nguesso received support from Angola, while President Pascal Lissouba relied on France and several regional states. The war reached a decisive outcome within months once foreign patrons became directly involved. By contrast, Afghanistan's war in the 1980s drew far more extensive outside participation: the Soviet Union and its allies supported the Kabul government, while the mujahideen were backed by the United States, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, China, and others (Giustozzi, 2000). In this case, external sponsorship persisted for years, fueling a decade-long conflict. Similar variation can be found elsewhere. In Sierra Leone, opposing external assistance from its African neighboring countries helped bring the war to a relatively quick close within a few years (Richards, 1998), whereas in Angola, alternating flows of U.S., Soviet, Cuban, and South African support kept the conflict alive for decades (Anderson, 2019). The Syrian civil war offers yet another example, where external support for opposing belligerents has contributed to its protracted nature (Phillips, 2020). These divergent outcomes point to a central question: when both sides receive foreign support, what features of external intervention explain why some

civil wars end quickly while others drag on?

We argue that the density of competition between the two opposing camps, structured by the number of cross-camp intervener dyads, is a fundamental driver of civil war duration. Civil wars with external involvement rarely feature a single patron on each side; instead, they draw in multiple states with divergent interests, strategies, and levels of commitment (Cunningham, 2006, 2010; Aydin & Regan, 2012; Sawyer, Gallagher Cunningham, & Reed, 2017; Maekawa, 2019). This multiplicity transforms the bargaining environment in ways that go beyond the conventional image of two monolithic camps negotiating over the terms of settlement. Crucially, each intervening state evaluates the adversary's capabilities, resolve, and credibility from its own strategic vantage point, rather than deferring to a unified assessment made by the domestic faction it backs (Findley & Teo, 2006; Cunningham, 2010; Maekawa, 2019). Also, because these states provide the resources that sustain military operations and shape the political strategies of their proxies (Regan, 2002; Pickering & Kisangani, 2006; Kaplow, 2016), their independent, and often divergent, judgments directly influence the trajectory of bargaining. Thus, it is not the number of intervening states per se, but the number of independent evaluative relationships they form across opposing sides, that compounds the bargaining problems standing between warring parties and a negotiated settlement.

We conceptualize this dynamic through the notion of the competitive intervener dyad (CID) — a pair of external states simultaneously providing military support to opposing sides in a civil war. Each CID constitutes its own bilateral evaluative relationship, in which an intervening state independently assesses its cross-camp counterpart's capabilities, resolve, and reliability on the basis of the particular history and strategic interests that define that dyadic tie. Because these assessments are grounded in different informational foundations and strategic vantage points, they are unlikely to converge, and as the number of CIDs grows, so too does the number of independently formed and mutually incompatible readings of the conflict, fragmenting bargaining and eroding the foundation for credible commitment. Critically, this logic is distinct from the finding that more interveners prolong civil wars: two conflicts with

identical intervener counts can differ substantially in their number of CIDs, and it is the latter that our argument identifies as the key driver of prolongation. Moreover, we argue that not all CIDs exert equal influence. When intervening states stand in a relationship of international rivalry, the structural features of that relationship, entrenched mutual suspicion, systematically adversarial patterns of interpretation, and fundamentally incompatible interests, make the informational distortions and commitment failures that CIDs produce deeper, more systematic, and less amenable to correction. Rival CIDs therefore exert a particularly pronounced prolonging effect on civil wars compared to their non-rival counterparts.

We test our argument on a global sample of intrastate conflicts from 1975 to 2017, drawing on the UCDP Armed Conflict Dataset (Davies et al., 2023; Harbom et al., 2008). Conflict duration is modeled using Cox proportional hazards models. Our key explanatory variables come from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program’s External Support Dataset (Meier et al., 2023), which captures external assistance and enables us to construct measures of CIDs – cross-camp pairings between states that back opposing sides in a conflict. To assess whether rivalry dynamics intensify these effects, we link this measure with the peace dataset (Diehl et al., 2019), which identifies international rivalries among intervening states. The results support our theoretical expectations. Civil wars are significantly more likely to persist as the number of CIDs increases: each additional CID lowers the hazard of termination by approximately 5%. The rivalry composition of CIDs matters further: rival CIDs reduce the likelihood of termination by approximately 32%, compared to a more modest and less consistently significant effect of around 4% for non-rival CIDs — suggesting that it is interstate antagonism among interveners, rather than the mere presence of cross-side pairings, that is the primary driver of conflict prolongation. Crucially, these effects persist even after accounting for the total number of foreign interveners and the degree of balance between the two opposing camps in external support, confirming that the conflict-prolonging influence of CIDs operates through the competitive configuration of intervention rather than its overall volume or symmetry. Also, these findings hold across a range of alternative specifications

and robustness checks.

Beyond uncovering the nuanced effects of two-sided interventions, these findings extend existing scholarship on the role of foreign state actors in civil conflicts. A large body of research emphasizes how external involvement shapes civil war outcomes by altering the behavior of domestic combatants. For example, material support to rebel groups has been shown to lengthen conflicts by hardening their bargaining positions (Byman et al., 2001; Schultz, 2010; Bapat, 2012). Even the expectation of foreign backing can influence negotiations by heightening uncertainty over battlefield outcomes (Akcinaroglu & Radziszewski, 2005; Thyne, 2006; Toukan, 2019). We build on this literature by shifting the focus away from domestic actors and toward the direct role of intervening states themselves in shaping bargaining dynamics under conditions of competitive intervention. In addition, this paper contributes to research at the intersection of inter- and intra-state conflict. Many existing studies emphasize rivalries between domestic governments and intervening states as drivers of conflict outcomes (Akcinaroglu & Radziszewski, 2005; Pickering & Kisangani, 2006; Findley & Teo, 2006; Salehyan et al., 2011; Qiu, 2022). Yet, prior studies have also shown that interstate competition frequently spills into civil wars, reshaping their dynamics (Toukan, 2019; Anderson, 2019). Along with this idea, we show how rivalries between intervening states themselves, rather than between a government and an outside patron, prolong the duration of civil wars.

More Than Two Sides: Competitive Intervention and Its Overlooked Variation

Civil wars in which external states intervene on opposing sides are often conceptualized as proxy wars, where domestic combatants become instruments of broader interstate competition. In such conflicts, external powers delegate the costs of fighting to local actors while pursuing their own geopolitical, security, or economic objectives (Dunér, 1981; Hughes, 2012; Mumford, 2013; Anderson, 2019). Rather than isolated episodes of foreign involvement,

such two-sided interventions transform civil wars into internationalized arenas in which states compete indirectly through their proxies. That is, the logic of proxy warfare underscores not only the material mechanisms of support, such as arms transfers or financial aid, but also the strategic interaction between opposing sponsors, whose competition entrenches local conflicts and alters the incentives of domestic actors.

Building on this perspective, scholars widely agree that two-sided interventions prolong civil wars. Civil wars with countering external support preserve relative power balances, giving both governments and rebels incentives to hold out for victory or better bargaining terms (Regan, 2002). Likewise, balanced interventions complicate negotiations, since multiple external actors must agree for settlements to hold, making stalemate the most likely outcome (Balch-Lindsay et al., 2008). More recent scholarship further emphasizes that competitive interventions extend conflict by worsening the bargaining problems inherent to civil wars. Aydin & Regan (2012) show that balancing interventions signal long-term commitment from external patrons, encouraging combatants to reject concessions and even exploit rival sponsors for additional resources. Likewise, Anderson (2019) notes that simultaneous support to both sides lowers the costs of fighting, increases uncertainty about relative resolve, and disrupts the convergence of expectations necessary for negotiation. Alsaadi (2023) also maintains that when external support is structured by geopolitical competition, incumbents harden their repressive strategies while opposition actors also receive backing, creating a cycle of escalation that reduces incentives for compromise¹.

Yet this literature largely overlooks variation within competitive interventions. Although scholars have employed a variety of terms to capture this phenomenon, such as “counter-intervention” (Regan, 2002), “balanced intervention” (Balch-Lindsay et al., 2008; Aydin & Regan, 2012), “competitive international involvement” (Alsaadi, 2023), and “competitive intervention” (Anderson, 2019; Schulhofer-Wohl, 2020), the common limitation of these approaches is that they conceptualize competition in binary terms. In other words, they focus

¹Schulhofer-Wohl (2020) characterizes this result as a “quagmire,” where civil wars become mired in prolonged stalemate precisely because external rivals are locked into competitive but restrained interventions.

primarily on whether or not both sides of a civil war receive external support, and then examine how this dichotomous condition influences conflict duration. In doing so, this literature implicitly treats entire coalitions of intervening states as the relevant unit of analysis, thereby obscuring how the behavior of individual states, and the relationships that cut across opposing coalitions, can also shape the trajectory of civil wars.²

Accounting for multiplicity highlights important variation within competitive interventions. Two-sided interventions rarely consist of just one supporter per side; instead, they almost always involve multiple states backing both governments and rebels. According to the UCDP External Support Dataset, of 66 civil conflict episodes with two-sided interventions (Meier et al., 2023), 59 featured more than one external supporter per side. The historical record also reveals this pattern: competitive intervention is not simply a dyadic contest between two states but a multilayered struggle in which coalitions of interveners shape the trajectory and duration of wars. The Angolan civil war illustrates this dynamic vividly, with the MPLA backed by the Soviet Union and Cuba against UNITA's coalition of supporters that included the United States, South Africa, and regional allies. In Afghanistan during the 1980s, the Kabul regime was sustained by the Soviet Union and its partners, while the mujahideen drew resources from the United States, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and China. More recently, the Syrian civil war has demonstrated an even denser web of rival sponsorships, with the Assad government supported by Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, and opposition forces aided by the United States, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other regional and Western partners.

To address this gap, this paper aims to account for how different configurations of competitive intervention influence how long civil wars last. Instead of treating two-sided intervention as a single, undifferentiated condition, it argues that the particular structure of cross-camp rivalries, shaped by the presence of multiple intervening states, carries its own independent ef-

²Aydin & Regan (2012) examine whether individual interveners align with both sides of a conflict (*balancing*) or with the same side (*bandwagoning*), but they operationalize this distinction in a dichotomous manner, coding each intervention simply as involving *balancing* or *bandwagoning*.

fect on conflict duration. In this way, shifting the question from whether external competition exists to how it is structured among multiple interveners opens new ground for understanding a relatively neglected driver of civil war prolongation.

Multiplicity in Civil Wars and the Independent Role of Intervening States

To explain the varying effects of competitive interventions on civil war duration, this paper builds on existing work that foregrounds the multiplicity of third-party intervention. A substantial body of research has established that civil wars drawing in larger numbers of foreign states tend to last longer, as the presence of multiple actors deepens bargaining problems between warring blocs (Cunningham, 2006, 2010; Aydin & Regan, 2012; Kaplow, 2016; Sawyer, Cunningham, & Reed, 2017; Maekawa, 2019). We take their premise as our starting point, that intervening states are autonomous actors with their own capabilities, resolve, and strategic interests. However, this paper diverges from the existing literature in an important way. Rather than treating interveners merely as sources of bargaining problems for combatants, it centers the interveners themselves as actors who independently assess one another's information and commitments, and whose divergent evaluations can themselves generate bargaining failures.

In many civil wars, domestic combatants continue to fight even when a negotiated settlement is less costly. Scholars explain this puzzle with bargaining problems that make civil wars last longer (Walter, 1997, 2002; Fearon, 2004; Cunningham, 2006; Walter, 2009). Their explanations revolve around information and commitment problems, which Fearon (1995) identifies as the primary conditions under which violent conflicts can occur among rational actors. First, wars can emerge from information asymmetries between parties, where unequal knowledge leads one side to reject settlements it might otherwise have accepted. Information problems are especially acute in civil wars, where the unconventional tactics rebel groups

tend to employ, guerrilla warfare, terrorism, and the like, make their true military capabilities particularly difficult to assess (Walter, 2009, 253). Yet, even under conditions of perfect information, wars can persist when parties cannot credibly commit to upholding a settlement over time, making continued fighting preferable to an agreement neither side trusts will hold. These commitment problems can be severe in intrastate conflicts because rebel groups are in general militarily weaker than governments (Walter, 1997; Fearon, 2004), and they may become even more vulnerable from exploitation after a settlement is made (Walter, 2002).

Importantly, scholars broadly demonstrate that the involvement of multiple intervening states tends to extend conflict duration, as each additional third-party actor further compounds the bargaining problems facing opposing warring groups. A first source of prolongation is worsened information asymmetry (Cunningham, 2006, 2010; Sawyer, Cunningham, & Reed, 2017). Because most battles in civil wars are dyadic, the presence of additional intervening states widens gaps in what opposing parties know about each other's capabilities and resolve, as non-participating actors remain difficult to assess. More interveners thus slow the process of battlefield learning and inject further uncertainty about how additional external resources translate into overall fighting capacity. A second mechanism through which multiparty interventions prolong civil wars is the deepening of commitment problems (Kaplow, 2016; Maekawa, 2019). Because intervening states are autonomous actors pursuing their own interests, coalitions rarely behave as unitary actors, and the resulting preference heterogeneity raises fears that any coalition member might later renege on a negotiated settlement, making warring parties increasingly reluctant to commit to a ceasefire.

However, the literature has not yet fully relaxed its assumptions regarding the role of intervening states. While scholars have relaxed the earlier assumption that warring parties in civil wars themselves are unitary actors, the multi-party intervention literature still treats the relevant agency as residing in the aggregate. More specifically, its focus is on how their heterogeneous interests or strategic goals are determinant for the negotiation outcome, rather than how each of the intervening states assesses the conflict. In doing so, intervening states are

implicitly treated as objects that generate information and commitment problems for domestic combatants, rather than as active political actors who assess the resolve, capabilities, and reliability of other participants in the war in their own right.

This paper treats intervening states as independent actors whose assessments of the conflict shape, rather than merely reflect, the bargaining process. Because each intervening state enters a conflict with its own strategic objectives and interests ([Findley & Teo, 2006](#); [Cunningham, 2010](#); [Maekawa, 2019](#)), it also brings its own reading of the conflict, one shaped by its particular perspective and therefore potentially distinct from those of domestic combatants and other intervening states. This matters because interveners are not peripheral to the bargaining process: through material support such as weapons, funding, and diplomacy, they exercise substantial leverage over their local allies, shaping whether governments and rebels pursue continued fighting or negotiations ([Regan, 2002](#); [Pickering & Kisangani, 2006](#); [Kaplow, 2016](#)). As domestic actors depend heavily on this external assistance, they must incorporate their patrons' preferences and judgments into their strategic calculations, meaning that how interveners read the adversary's capabilities, resolve, and credibility feeds directly into the dynamics of civil war bargaining.

This evaluative role becomes especially consequential in competitive intervention settings, where intervening states assess not only domestic combatants but also, and perhaps more centrally, the external states backing the opposing side. Civil wars frequently serve as arenas for broader interstate competition, with interventions on behalf of opposing belligerents understood as extensions of rivalries playing out at the international level ([Gleditsch et al., 2008](#); [Anderson, 2019](#)). In such settings, intervening states have strong incentives to assess the resolve, capabilities, and reliability of their counterparts across opposing camps, gauging how much military and financial support rival patrons are willing to commit, and how credibly they will adhere to any negotiated agreement. These assessments are shaped by the particular bilateral relationships between pairs of intervening states, and are therefore unlikely to be uniform across the coalition. The involvement of multiple intervening states

in competitive settings thus introduces an additional layer of evaluative complexity, one that existing accounts, focused as they are on aggregate numbers, are ill-equipped to capture.

In a nutshell, the existing scholarship has recognized a key dynamic, that foreign states bring their own interests and strategic agendas to civil conflicts, shaping how belligerents bargain, yet it has not fully addressed situations where intervening states themselves occupy a central role, facing off against third-party actors on the opposite side. When intervening states are treated as independent actors making their own judgments about a conflict, rather than simply as sources of bargaining problems, the analytical focus must shift accordingly. The question is not merely how many states get involved, but how many intervening dyads emerge backing competing sides. Each such pairing constitutes its own evaluative relationship, in which an intervening state forms judgments about the resolve, capacity, and trustworthiness of its counterpart in the opposing camp, and given the particular character of each bilateral tie, those judgments are unlikely to converge. This paper contends that it is precisely this web of cross-camp evaluative pairings that has gone underappreciated as a factor prolonging civil wars. The next section traces how these dyadic relationships give rise to distinct bargaining problems, and derives hypotheses about their independent influence on how long civil wars last.

Competitive Intervener Dyads, Bargaining Problems, and Civil War Duration

In this paper, we seek to explain why two-sided interventions produce varying effects on civil war duration, while advancing a theoretical framework built around the multiplicity of third-party intervention. Our core argument is that the configuration of competitive intervention, defined by the set of external state pairings simultaneously backing opposing sides, shapes the bargaining environment faced by warring parties in consequential ways. We capture this dynamic through the concept of the competitive intervener dyad (CID), which refers to a pair of

external states that simultaneously provide military support to opposing sides in the conflict. CIDs matter because intervening states do not simply funnel resources to their proxies simultaneously; as discussed previously, they independently evaluate one another's capabilities, resolve, and reliability, and it is these bilateral assessments that give each dyad its analytical significance.

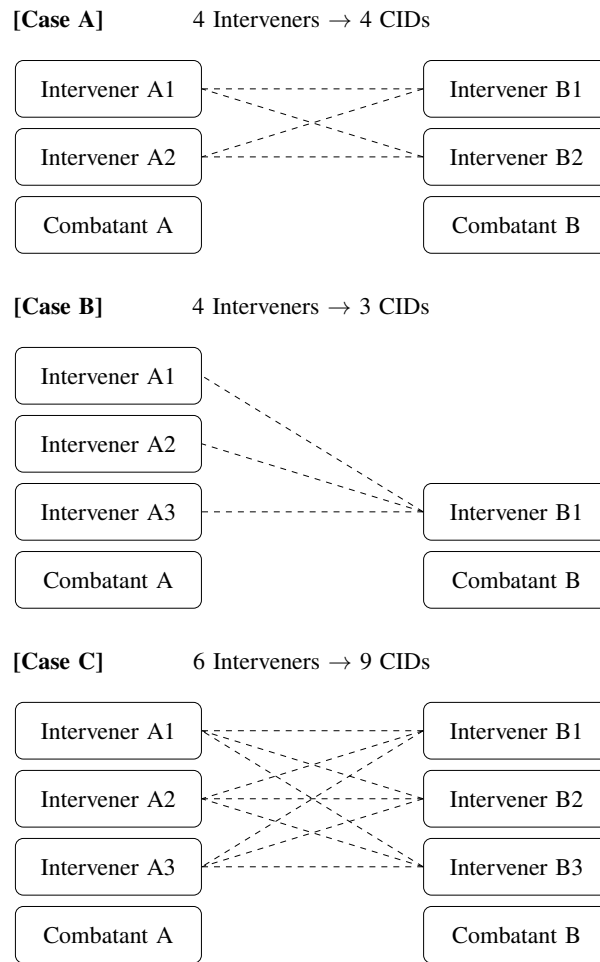
We argue that as the number of CIDs increases, so too does the density of competitive intervention, and this increased density prolongs civil wars primarily by compounding the bargaining problems that stand between warring parties. First, the introduction of CIDs exacerbates the information problem that already complicates civil war bargaining, but through a mechanism that is qualitatively distinct from what a simple increase in the number of intervening states would produce. The conventional view treats additional interveners primarily as sources of uncertainty, more outside actors mean more moving parts, making the battlefield harder to read (Cunningham, 2006, 2010; Sawyer, Cunningham, & Reed, 2017). Our argument shifts the focus from the quantity of interveners to the structure of the evaluative relationships between them. Each CID constitutes its own bilateral relationship, in which an intervening state forms independent judgments about its cross-camp counterpart's capabilities and resolve, judgments shaped by the particular history, interests, and intelligence that characterize that specific dyadic relationship. Because these assessments are grounded in different informational foundations and strategic vantage points, they are unlikely to converge, and may actively pull in different directions. In our theory, it is this divergence of assessments across dyads, rather than the mere presence of additional outside actors, that compounds the information problem. Accordingly, as the number of CIDs grows, so too does the number of independently formed and mutually incompatible readings of the conflict, making it increasingly difficult for combatants to form accurate expectations about the distribution of capabilities and resolve, and thereby pushing a negotiated settlement further out of reach.

Moreover, CIDs can also worsen the commitment problem that underlies civil war bargaining, again through a mechanism that is distinct from what a simple increase in the num-

ber of intervening states would suggest. As discussed, the conventional view holds that more interveners undermine commitment by multiplying the number of actors whose consent is needed to uphold a settlement, more guarantors means more potential defectors (Kaplow, 2016; Maekawa, 2019). Our argument shifts the focus from the number of guarantors to the compatibility of their guarantees. Each CID constitutes its own distinct commitment dynamic, in which an intervening state's ability to make credible promises is shaped by its particular relationship with its cross-camp counterpart, their history of interaction, the depth of their rivalry, and the degree to which their interests are fundamentally incompatible. Because each dyadic relationship carries its own logic of competition, the guarantees that interveners on opposing sides can credibly offer are unlikely to be mutually reinforcing; they may, in fact, undercut one another. That is, it is this structural incompatibility of guarantees across CIDs, rather than their sheer number, that makes credible commitment so difficult to sustain. Thus, as the number of CIDs grows, so too does the number of independently operating and mutually incompatible commitment dynamics, eroding the foundation on which any durable settlement would have to rest.

We illustrate these logics through [Figure 1](#). In *Case A*, four interveners, two on each side, produce four distinct CIDs, each represented by a dashed arrow connecting an intervener on one side to a counterpart on the other. Each of these arrows represents not merely a cross-camp pairing but an independent evaluative relationship, in which an intervening state forms its own judgments about the capabilities and resolve of its counterpart, judgments grounded in the particular history and strategic interests that define that bilateral tie. Because each CID operates as its own distinct evaluative relationship, the judgments it produces are unlikely to align; for instance, *Intervener A1*'s assessment of *Intervener B1*'s capabilities and resolve will most likely diverge from the reading that *Intervener A2* forms of the same counterpart. Similarly, each arrow in the figure represents a distinct commitment dynamic, in which an intervening state's ability to make credible promises is shaped by its particular relationship with its cross-camp counterpart. Because these guarantees are rooted in competing and incompat-

Figure 1: Different Configurations of Competitive Intervener Dyads



ible interests, they may actively undercut one another, eroding the foundation on which any durable settlement would have to rest. In Case A, for instance, *Intervener A1*'s judgment of whether *Intervener B1* will credibly comply with a potential settlement is likely to differ from the assessment *Intervener A2* forms of that same counterpart, multiplying the sources of credibility failure across the conflict.

Figure 1 further depicts that how CIDs generate bargaining problems that go beyond what alternative explanations would suggest. First, comparing *Case A* and *Case B* illustrates how the logic of CIDs differs from, while building upon, the established finding that a larger number of interveners leads to longer civil wars (Cunningham, 2006, 2010; Sawyer, Cunningham, & Reed, 2017; Maekawa, 2019). As noted, we do not dispute this baseline story, but propose

the structure of cross-camp competition as an additional explanation. Although both cases feature an identical total of four intervening states, they differ fundamentally in the number of CIDs they produce: *Case A* generates four distinct cross-camp evaluative relationships, while *Case B* generates only three. This structural difference is precisely what our argument foregrounds, it is not the number of outside actors per se, but the number of independent evaluative relationships they form across opposing sides, that drives the compounding of bargaining problems. We therefore expect *Case A* to prolong civil war more than *Case B*, as its greater number of CIDs generates more divergent assessments of capabilities and resolve and more structurally incompatible commitment dynamics than *Case B*'s more skewed intervention structure.

Our theoretical logic of CIDs is also distinct from the argument that third-party intervention prolongs civil wars by producing a balance of power between opposing sides (Regan, 2002; Balch-Lindsay et al., 2008; Aydin & Regan, 2012; Anderson, 2019). From this perspective, one might attribute any difference in duration between *Case A* and *Case B* to the fact that *Case A* features a more even distribution of interveners across the two competing factions. Comparing *Case A* and *Case C*, however, shows that balance alone cannot account for our predictions. Both cases are symmetrical in terms of the number of interveners supporting each side, yet they differ in the total number of interveners, and consequently in the number of CIDs they produce. It is this difference in CID count, rather than the balance of external support, that our argument identifies as the key driver of prolongation: we therefore expect *Case C* to generate more divergent assessments of capabilities and resolve, and more structurally incompatible commitment dynamics, than *Case A*, and thereby to prolong civil war further.

This theoretical logic leads us to our first hypothesis as follows:

H1: Civil wars involving more competitive intervener dyads will endure longer than those with fewer dyads.

Rivalry within CIDs and the Deepening of Competition

Our focus now turns to how the nature of the bilateral relationship between intervening states shapes the depth of competition within CIDs. Because the core logic of CIDs centers on how each intervening state perceives and evaluates its counterpart on the opposing side, the character of that bilateral relationship is analytically central. Not all such relationships are alike. Some reflect little more than preexisting ties to domestic factions or limited regional strategic interests, while others are defined by deep and enduring interstate antagonism — and it is this variation, we argue, that determines how severely a given CID compounds the bargaining problems underlying civil war.

We focus on the presence of international rivalry as a key factor that shapes the character of a CID.³ International rivalries are rooted in persistent and irreconcilable conflicts of national interest, characterized by enduring military confrontations (Diehl & Goertz, 2001) and mutual recognition of adversarial status (Colaresi et al., 2008). These entrenched antagonisms predispose rival states to systematic biases, including misperception (Jervis, 1976) and deep-seated mistrust (Maoz & Mor, 2002), that color how each side interprets the other's actions,⁴ not only in direct disputes but also when their competition spills into civil war intervention. When a civil war becomes a theater for such rivalry, the conflict absorbs the full weight of the interveners' broader strategic competition, raising the stakes of every signal exchanged, widening the room for misinterpretation, and pushing a negotiated settlement further out of reach (Mumford, 2013; Anderson, 2019; Phillips, 2020). Also, the presence of international rivalry within a civil war further complicates conflict dynamics by deepening uncertainty over battlefield outcomes and distorting the expectations that domestic combatants form about the likely trajectory of the war (Akcinaroglu & Radziszewski, 2005; Findley

³Other scholarship has highlighted how additional characteristics of third-party interveners shape the dynamics of civil war intervention, including their regime type (Salehyan et al., 2011; Han & Park, 2026), material and ideational interests (San-Akca, 2016), and strategies for allocating support (Tamm, 2016).

⁴Because the hostilities between rival states are structurally entrenched, even cooperative gestures are unlikely to meaningfully de-escalate the underlying tensions (Kertzer et al., 2020; Han, 2025).

& Teo, 2006; Salehyan et al., 2011; Qiu, 2022).

We argue that these distinctive features of international rivalry make rival-linked CIDs more corrosive to civil war bargaining than CIDs in which no such strong antagonism exists. First, the informational distortions produced by CIDs are likely to be pronounced when the dyadic relationship is characterized by international rivalry. Rivals share a long history of strategic competition, during which each side has accumulated deep, but often adversarial and mutually suspicious, knowledge of the other. Rather than facilitating accurate assessment, this history tends to entrench worst-case interpretations: a rival's signals of restraint are more likely to be read as deception, and its displays of strength as confirmation of aggressive intent. Also, within a CID defined by rivalry, each intervening state has particularly strong incentives to misrepresent its own resolve and capabilities, knowing that its counterpart is simultaneously doing the same. Critically, the assessments that rival intervening states form of one another are unlikely to align with how other members of the same warring coalition read the same signals — non-rival states within the coalition may interpret a cross-camp intervener's behavior through a less adversarial lens, producing divergent readings of the conflict even within a single camp. It is this intra-coalition divergence of assessments, structurally rooted in the particular antagonism of the rival dyadic relationship rather than in general uncertainty, that makes rival-linked CIDs uniquely corrosive to the informational foundations of civil war bargaining.

Additionally, the commitment problems generated by CIDs are similarly intensified when the intervening states stand in a relationship of international rivalry. Credible commitment requires, at minimum, that an intervening state's promises be taken seriously by its cross-camp counterpart, yet rivals are precisely the states least disposed to extend such credibility to one another. Decades of strategic competition give rivals strong reasons to interpret any commitment offered across the civil war divide as contingent, reversible, or outright insincere. Moreover, the depth of their conflicting interests means that the guarantees rivals can offer are not merely unlikely to be mutually reinforcing, they are structurally opposed, each

side's commitment to its proxy being inseparable from its determination to deny the other a favorable outcome. Within a rival-linked CID, this incompatibility of guarantees is not a product of miscoordination but of fundamental interest conflict, making it exceptionally difficult for any settlement to be underwritten credibly. The presence of even one such dyad can cast doubt over the durability of any agreement; as the number of rival-linked CIDs grows, the prospect of credible, mutually acceptable commitment recedes further still.

The historical record illustrates how rivalry between intervening states can shape both the trajectory and duration of civil wars. In Angola, the confrontation between Cuba and South Africa, backing the MPLA and UNITA, respectively, exemplified a rival-linked CID in which competing ideological and geopolitical interests, themselves embedded within the broader US-USSR rivalry that elevated the stakes of every signal and commitment exchanged across the civil war divide, entrenched the conflict for years. Resolution came only through the externally brokered Tripartite Accord of 1988, a testament to the fact that it was negotiation between the intervening states, not between the domestic combatants, that ultimately unlocked a path out of the conflict (Polack, 2013). The Yemen Civil War offers a similarly instructive case: the deep rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has sustained opposing factions and compounded both the informational and commitment problems described above, as each side's signals of restraint or escalation are filtered through a lens of mutual suspicion that makes accurate assessment extraordinarily difficult. Yet even here, the dyadic logic cuts both ways, Iran's March 2023 pledge to halt military support for the Houthis illustrates how shifts within a specific intervener dyad can open windows of de-escalation that the broader conflict dynamic would otherwise foreclose (Gallagher et al., 2023; Ghobari, 2023). These cases suggest that the nature of the relationship within a CID, especially, whether it is defined by rivalry, matters for how civil wars are fought, prolonged, and resolved.

Taken together, the presence of international rivalry within a CID magnifies the bargaining problems described above. While CIDs generally compound the information and commitment problems that underlie civil war bargaining, through divergent assessments and

structurally incompatible guarantees, rivalry intensifies both dynamics by making adversarial misreading and credibility failure not incidental but constitutive features of the dyadic relationship. Because rivals approach one another with entrenched suspicion and fundamentally opposed interests, the divergence of assessments that CIDs produce is deeper, more systematic, and less amenable to correction through battlefield signals or diplomatic reassurance. Accordingly, we present our second hypothesis as follows:

H2: The prolonging effect of competitive intervener dyads on civil war duration will be stronger when the intervening states are rivals than when they are not.

Research Design

Data and Sample

We test our hypotheses by conducting a statistical analysis of all civil wars fought between 1975 and 2017. To identify relevant cases, we draw on the Uppsala Conflict Data Program's (UCDP) Dyadic Dataset. This dataset defines armed conflict as "a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in a calendar year" (Davies et al., 2023; Harbom et al., 2008). Accordingly, the unit of analysis is a government-rebel dyad active in conflicts that caused at least twenty-five fatalities in a given year from 1975 to 2017. The dyadic structure is well-suited to our analysis because it isolates how competing interveners, who simultaneously support opposing domestic combatants, affect the incentives and capabilities that determine how long a given conflict persists.

Our dependent variable is the duration of dyadic conflict episodes, operationalized as the total number of days until a dyad reaches termination within a given calendar year. This

measure is constructed using the start and end dates variables for each dyad as reported in the UCDP Dyadic Dataset. A dyadic conflict is estimated to start when the criteria for inclusion in the UCDP Dyadic Dataset are met and end when fighting between that specific government-rebel dyad is no longer recognized according to the same criteria for a whole year. This operationalization accounts for the full range of both extended and sporadic fighting and allows for analyses to assess dyad-specific differences in the odds of termination. As a result, our dataset is structured as a cross-national time-series, in which dyad-years serve as the temporal unit and both dyad-specific and time-varying covariates can be incorporated into the analysis.

Independent Variables

To construct our key independent variables, we rely on the Uppsala Conflict Data Program's External Support Dataset (UCDP ESD) (Meier et al., 2023), which provides annual information on external support from foreign states to belligerents in ongoing conflicts. The dataset records a wide range of support types, including weapons and ammunition transfers, financial aid, territorial access, direct military operations, war material, logistical assistance, training, access to military infrastructure, intelligence sharing, recruitment, gun running, and harboring, thus capturing both material and non-material dimensions of external involvement. States are coded as interveners when they provide any of these forms of assistance to a conflict party listed in the UCDP Dyadic Dataset. The UCDP ESD differentiates between substantiated and alleged cases of support; in order to maintain reliability and reduce measurement error, our analysis excludes alleged cases and relies only on substantiated evidence.

Our dataset identifies 1,829 dyad-years with third-party intervention out of 2,202 total dyad-years. Governments are the more frequent recipients of external support, with 1,585 cases, compared to 1,023 cases of support directed toward rebel groups. Of these interventions, 1,050 are one-sided, where only one party, the government or the rebels, receives

support, while 779 are two-sided, in which both sides obtain external support. Across all dyad-years, the average number of intervening states is 3.7. The scale of support varies by the domestic combatant: governments receive support from 2.85 external states per dyad-year on average, while rebel groups receive support from 0.89. Two-sided dyads see larger numbers of interveners, with on average 3.29 government supporters and 1.98 rebel supporters.

Our primary independent variable is the count of competitive intervener dyads (CIDs), which captures the extent of cross-cutting external involvement in a given dyad-year. CIDs are defined as unique pairings between states that simultaneously support the government and the specific rebel group involved in the dyad. We calculate the count of this variable by multiplying the number of states assisting the government by the number of states backing the rebel group in the dyad. This operationalization reflects the degree of international competition embedded within each dyadic engagement, as each pair represents a potential site of confrontation between foreign actors. Our data records 4,873 CIDs across 779 dyad-years. While the average number of competitive intervener dyads per observation within two-sided intervention is 6.26, the distribution is highly skewed: the median is 3, and roughly three-quarters of the observations include 5 or fewer dyads. The civil war in Afghanistan in 2014 represents the case with the highest number of competitive intervener dyads. In this conflict, the Government of Afghanistan was backed by the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and 45 other countries, while the Taliban received support from Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar.

By construction, the number of CIDs is the product of supporter counts on each side — a feature inherent to the dyadic concept, since cross-side pairs can only form when external supporters are present on both sides. This raises the concern that a nonlinear marginal effect of additional supporters could register in the CID count, potentially conflating the structural logic of cross-side competition with the independent contribution of supporter volume. We therefore construct two alternative measures that preserve the conceptual content of competitive intervention while reducing sensitivity to raw supporter counts. The first alternative is

the *logged count of CIDs*, calculated as $\log(1 + \text{CIDs})$. By imposing diminishing returns on each additional CID, the logarithmic transformation compresses the scale of the raw count, reducing sensitivity to extreme values and nonlinear supporter effects, while preserving the substantive ordering of dyad-years by their degree of cross-side competition. The second alternative is the *ratio of CIDs to total interveners*, defined as the number of cross-side pairs divided by the total number of foreign supporters in the dyad-year, set to zero when intervention is one-sided or absent. Rather than counting cross-side pairs in absolute terms, this measure captures what proportion of foreign actors are engaged in competing alignments. If *H1* hold, we would expect this ratio to prolong conflict duration regardless of how many supporters are present on each side in absolute terms.

We further distinguish CIDs by whether the paired interveners share a rivalry relationship. Drawing on the “peace dataset” (Diehl et al., 2019), which codes international rivalries through 2015, we differentiate between severe rivalries, where states consistently view one another as enemies and engage in frequent hostile interactions (Colaresi et al., 2008), and lesser rivalries, where conflict intensity and frequency are lower but unresolved issues, mutual distrust, occasional militarized or diplomatic hostilities persist. Both severe and lesser rivalries are included in our analyses to capture the full spectrum of rivalry dynamics. From this, we construct parallel measures of rival CIDs and non-rival CIDs, distinguishing cross-side pairs that involve interstate rivals from those that do not, using the same operationalization as the overall CID measure: the raw count, the logged count, and the ratio to total interveners. The logged and ratio versions address the same nonlinearity concerns discussed above, allowing us to test *H2* under the same range of functional-form assumptions as *H1*. Here, whether a given CID involves rivals is determined by the prior history of interstate relations rather than by supporter counts, meaning the rival-CID measure isolates a qualitative feature of the dyadic configuration that is analytically independent of intervener volume.

Our dataset records 465 dyad-years with at least one rival CID. Among these cases, 190 feature one rival CID and 159 feature two, while larger numbers of rival CIDs are rare. The

maximum observed is 6 rival CIDs, shared by three dyad-years: the Iraqi government's confrontations with SCIRI and the KDP in 1984, and the Government of Somalia versus the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS/UIC) in 2006. The Iraq-SCIRI 1984 case is particularly striking, as 6 of the 7 total CIDs in that dyad-year involved established rivals: the Iraqi government received support from the United States, France, the Soviet Union, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan, and Turkey, while Iran was SCIRI's sole external supporter.

Control Variables

We control for several factors that may confound the relationship between our main explanatory variables and civil war duration. National-level characteristics may shape both the likelihood of external involvement and the persistence of conflict. Previous research links a country's political and economic conditions to the length of civil wars ([Collier & Hoeffler, 2004](#); [Gurr, 2000](#)). Regime type, in particular, can affect conflict dynamics, as democratic and autocratic governments differ in their institutional constraints, accountability mechanisms, and approaches to negotiation. To account for these effects, we include a country's Polity score from the Polity IV dataset ([Marshall & Gurr, 2020](#)), which ranges from -10 (fully autocratic) to 10 (fully democratic). State capacity may also influence both intervention and conflict duration, since weaker states tend to have less control over territory and may invite external interference. We therefore include GDP per capita (log), drawn from the World Bank's World Development Indicators ([WorldBank, 2024](#)), as a proxy for state capacity. Additionally, we control for population size and mountainous terrain ([Fearon & Laitin, 2003](#)), as demographic scale and challenging geography can prolong conflict and shape the feasibility of intervention.

Conflict-level characteristics are also important determinants of duration. Conflicts involving territorial claims often last longer than those fought over control of the central government, as secessionist or autonomy-seeking groups tend to be more organized and resilient. We capture this using the incompatibility variable from the UCDP Armed Conflict Dataset

(Davies et al., 2023), coded 1 for conflicts involving any territorial issue and 0 otherwise. Also, temporal and structural factors may influence the intensity and duration of civil wars. We include a Cold War dummy variable (1 if the dyad-year occurred during the Cold War, 0 otherwise) to capture the broader geopolitical context, which often shaped both the nature of external involvement and the endurance of conflicts (Anderson, 2019).

Several controls capture features of external intervention that may shape conflict duration. To distinguish dyadic effects from the marginal effects of supporters, we control for the total number of foreign interveners in each dyad-year. This control ensures that any observed effect of CIDs reflects the cross-side configuration of intervention, rather than the overall level of foreign involvement in the conflict, addressing the alternative explanations advanced in existing literature that attribute conflict duration to the sheer number of intervening parties (Cunningham, 2006, 2010; Sawyer, Cunningham, & Reed, 2017; Maekawa, 2019).

We also include several controls capturing the structural configuration of intervention discussed in existing literature (Regan, 2002; Balch-Lindsay et al., 2008; Aydin & Regan, 2012; Anderson, 2019). *One-sided intervention* equals one when only a single side receives external support, distinguishing dyads with asymmetric foreign involvement from those with no intervention or two-sided intervention. *Balanced intervention* measures the relative symmetry of foreign support across sides, calculated as the ratio of the smaller to the larger supporter count among dyad-years with at least one intervener on either side. It is the ratio of the minimum to the maximum supporter count across the two sides of the dyad, ranging from zero, indicating fully asymmetric intervention, to one, indicating perfectly matched foreign support, ensuring that our CID estimates capture the cross-side configuration specifically rather than the overall degree of balance between the two sides. Finally, we include an indicator coded one when the United States and Russia (or the Soviet Union) intervene on opposing sides in a given dyad-year, capturing the distinctive conflict-prolonging influence of superpower competition, whereby both powers sustain their respective clients through material and diplomatic support, separately from the broader rivalry effects estimated through our CID measures.

Results

Table 1 and Table 2 report Cox proportional hazards estimates of the effect of competitive intervener dyads (CIDs) and their rivalry composition on the survival of civil war dyads, testing *H1* and *H2* respectively. All models are estimated relative to a baseline of dyad-years without any foreign involvement. As such, a negative coefficient indicates that an increase in the corresponding variable is associated with a lower hazard of dyad-conflict termination, that is, a longer expected conflict duration compared to the cases without any interventions. Standard errors are clustered at the conflict level throughout to account for the non-independence of dyads belonging to the same war. Also, the results presented here incorporate modifications for variables that fail diagnostic tests for the proportional hazards assumption, with unmodified models reported in Appendix 1.

H1 predicts that a greater number of CIDs prolongs conflict between a government and a rebel group. In Table 1, Models 1 through 5 test this hypothesis and broadly support our theoretical expectation. Model 1 tests the hazard of dyad termination on the count of CIDs alongside country- and conflict-level controls. The negative and statistically significant coefficient on the CID count indicates that conflicts between a government and a rebel group tend to persist longer as the number of cross-side intervener pairings increases. Model 2 adds the total number of foreign interveners as a control, accounting for the possibility that the CID effect simply reflects the overall intensity of foreign involvement rather than a distinct dyadic dynamic. The CID coefficient remains negative and statistically significant. Model 3 substitutes the raw count of CIDs with the logged count, $\log(1 + \text{CIDs})$, addressing the concern that the raw count may amplify nonlinear effects of supporter counts. Likewise, Model 4 uses the ratio of CIDs to total interveners as the explanatory variable, isolating the relative intensity of dyadic competition from the absolute number of supporters on each side. Model 5 adds a measure of relative balance of supporters across sides to the baseline specification to capture the structural feature of two-sided intervention beyond what the bare count of CIDs reflects.

Table 1: Cox Hazard Models on the Effect of CIDs on Civil War Duration

| | <i>DV: Civil War Termination</i> | | | | |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| | <i>Model 1</i> | <i>Model 2</i> | <i>Model 3</i> | <i>Model 4</i> | <i>Model 5</i> |
| Num. of CIDs | -0.062** (0.030) | -0.054* (0.030) | | | -0.043* (0.024) |
| Num. of CIDs (Log) | | | -0.439*** (0.090) | | |
| Ratio of CIDs | | | | -0.771*** (0.155) | |
| One-sided Intervention | -0.071 (0.106) | -0.036 (0.108) | -0.243** (0.103) | -0.246** (0.105) | -0.187* (0.107) |
| Cold War | -0.629*** (0.112) | -0.635*** (0.112) | -0.588*** (0.113) | -0.596*** (0.114) | -0.640*** (0.115) |
| GDP per capita (Log) | -0.029 (0.040) | -0.030 (0.040) | -0.023 (0.041) | -0.027 (0.041) | -0.030 (0.041) |
| Log Population | -0.104** (0.041) | -0.102** (0.041) | -0.118*** (0.041) | -0.122*** (0.042) | -0.117*** (0.041) |
| Log Population×Ln(time) | 0.001 (0.001) | 0.001 (0.001) | 0.001 (0.001) | 0.001 (0.001) | 0.001 (0.001) |
| Polity Level | -0.850 (0.653) | -0.840 (0.653) | -0.806 (0.635) | -0.786 (0.626) | -0.741 (0.617) |
| Polity Level×Ln(time) | 0.061 (0.045) | 0.060 (0.045) | 0.059 (0.043) | 0.058 (0.043) | 0.055 (0.042) |
| Mountainous Terrain | -0.042 (0.035) | -0.051 (0.036) | -0.049 (0.035) | -0.053 (0.035) | -0.054 (0.035) |
| Mountainous Terrain×Ln(time) | 0.004*** (0.001) | 0.004*** (0.001) | 0.004*** (0.001) | 0.004*** (0.001) | 0.004*** (0.001) |
| Territorial Conflict | -0.018 (0.095) | -0.028 (0.096) | -0.032 (0.097) | -0.028 (0.097) | -0.029 (0.096) |
| Total Interveners | | -0.010** (0.005) | -0.007* (0.004) | -0.008** (0.004) | -0.010** (0.004) |
| Balanced Intervention | | | | | -0.497*** (0.152) |
| AIC | 6370.186 | 6369.507 | 6352.571 | 6353.235 | 6362.876 |
| Num. events | 584 | 584 | 584 | 584 | 584 |
| Num. obs. | 2187 | 2187 | 2187 | 2187 | 2187 |

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$

Across these specifications, the prolonging effect of competitive intervener dyads persists, providing support for *H1*.

Importantly, the results for our intervention controls reinforce the substantive interpretation of our main findings. The negative and significant coefficient on total interveners in Model 2 indicates that each additional foreign actor reduces the hazard of termination by approximately 1%,⁵ independently prolonging conflict duration, a finding consistent with existing literature (Cunningham, 2006, 2010; Sawyer, Cunningham, & Reed, 2017). However, this effect is notably smaller in magnitude than that of CIDs, where each additional cross-side pairing reduces the hazard by approximately 5.3%, suggesting that the dyadic configuration of intervention across opposing sides is a more powerful driver of conflict prolongation than overall intervener volume. The coefficient on intervention balance in Model 5 is similarly large and statistically significant, with the perfectly balanced numbers of foreign support associated with approximately a 39% reduction in the hazard of termination, consistent with the logic that symmetrically balanced external backing entrenches a military stalemate (Regan, 2002; Balch-Lindsay et al., 2008; Aydin & Regan, 2012). Nevertheless, the CID effect remains robust after accounting for both controls, with each additional cross-side pairing still associated with approximately a 4.2% reduction in the hazard of termination, indicating that competitive intervener pairings prolong conflict independently of both the total number of foreign actors and the overall balance of support across the two sides.

Turning to *H2*, we expect that conflicts involving rival CIDs persist longer than those with only non-rival CIDs. Models 6 through 10 in Table 2 test this expectation by decomposing the overall CID count into two components, rival CIDs, involving states with a rivalry relationship, and non-rival CIDs, which do not, allowing us to assess whether the conflict-prolonging effect of competitive intervention is driven specifically by interstate rivals or operates equally across all cross-side pairings. Across these models, the results support our expectation: rival

⁵In a Cox proportional hazards model, the hazard ratio associated with a one-unit increase in a covariate is given by $\exp(\hat{\beta})$, where $\hat{\beta}$ is the estimated coefficient. The percentage change in the hazard is computed as $(\exp(\hat{\beta}) - 1) \times 100$.

CIDs exert large and statistically significant conflict-prolonging effects, suggesting that the overall CID effect is driven primarily by cross-side pairings involving interstate rivals.

Model 6 examines the hazard of conflict-dyad termination as a function of the counts of rival and non-rival CIDs alongside country- and conflict-level control variables. The coefficient on rival CIDs is large, negative, and statistically significant, while the coefficient on non-rival CIDs is also negative but much smaller in magnitude. The disparity in magnitude provides initial evidence that the prolonging effect of competitive intervention is concentrated in the rival pairings rather than spread evenly across all dyads. Model 6 adds the total number of foreign interveners and an indicator for U.S.–Russia rivalry to Model 5. The rival-CID coefficient remains substantively large and statistically significant, whereas the non-rival CID coefficient diminishes toward zero, reinforcing the result that the prolonging effect is specific to rival pairings rather than attributable to other types of intervener dyads.

Model 8 replaces the raw CID counts with the ratio of rival and non-rival CIDs to total interveners, addressing the nonlinearity concern that motivated the construction of these alternative measures. Both coefficients are large, negative, and statistically significant, with the rival-CID ratio considerably larger in magnitude than the non-rival ratio. Model 9 replaces the raw counts with their logged counterparts, $\log(1 + \text{rival CIDs})$ and $\log(1 + \text{non-rival CIDs})$ respectively. The logged rival-CID coefficient is substantially larger in magnitude than the logged non-rival coefficient, confirming that the rival-CID effect dominates even under functional forms that mitigate sensitivity to extreme values. In the final model in [Table 2](#), we add the variable of balanced intervention to the baseline rival/non-rival specification to ensure that the rival-CID effect is not driven by the broader structural feature of two-sided intervention. The rival-CID coefficient remains negative and statistically significant, while the balanced-intervention indicator is also negative and significant, suggesting that two-sided intervention can prolong dyads as a structural feature distinct from the rival-CID effect.

The decomposition of CIDs into rival and non-rival components reveals a striking substantive asymmetry. Each additional rival CID reduces the hazard of termination by approx-

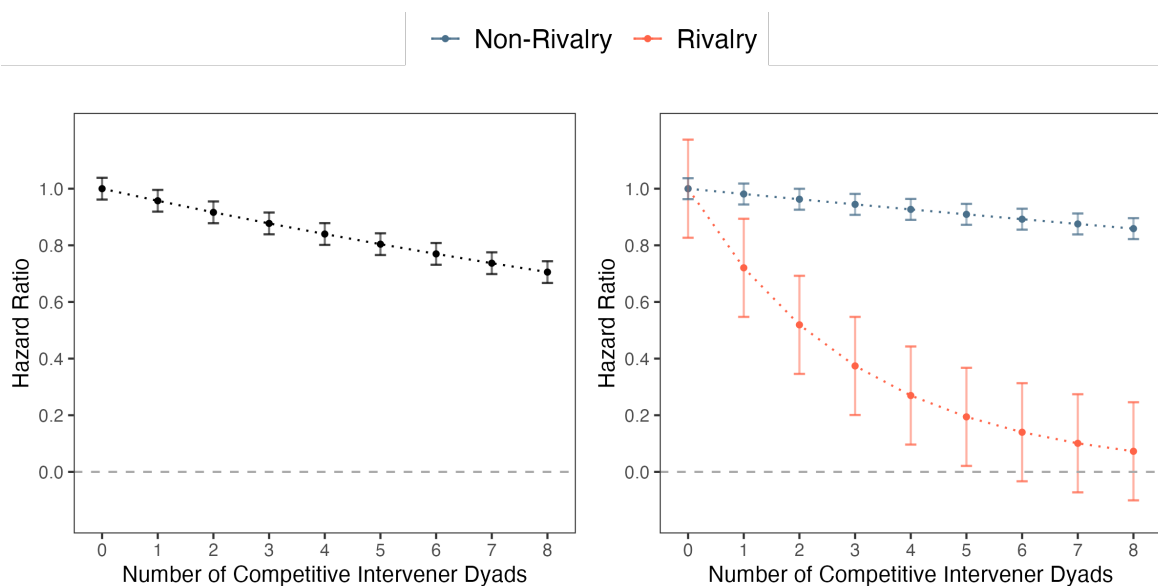
Table 2: Cox Hazard Models on the Effect of International Rivalry on Civil War Duration

| | <i>DV: Civil War Termination</i> | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| | <i>Model 6</i> | <i>Model 7</i> | <i>Model 8</i> | <i>Model 9</i> | <i>Model 10</i> |
| Num. of Rival CIDs | -0.391*** (0.105) | -0.415*** (0.139) | | | -0.362*** (0.140) |
| Num. of Non-rival CIDs | -0.037** (0.017) | -0.019 (0.012) | | | -0.017* (0.010) |
| Ratio of Rival CIDs | | | -2.012*** (0.372) | | |
| Ratio of Non-rival CIDs | | | -0.594*** (0.165) | | |
| Num. of Rival CIDs (Log)×Ln(time) | | | 0.002*** (0.001) | | |
| Num. of Rival CIDs (Log) | | | | -0.876*** (0.229) | |
| Num. of Non-rival CIDs (Log) | | | | -0.213** (0.092) | |
| Num. of Non-rival CIDs (Log)×Ln(time) | | | | 0.001 (0.001) | |
| One-sided Intervention | -0.083 (0.093) | -0.060 (0.094) | -0.235** (0.103) | -0.168 (0.102) | -0.183* (0.100) |
| Cold War | -0.534*** (0.114) | -0.540*** (0.115) | -0.529*** (0.121) | -0.527*** (0.117) | -0.552*** (0.118) |
| GDP per capita (Log) | 0.001 (0.040) | 0.001 (0.040) | 0.004 (0.040) | 0.004 (0.040) | -0.000 (0.041) |
| Log Population | -0.119*** (0.040) | -0.118*** (0.040) | -0.134*** (0.041) | -0.125*** (0.040) | -0.129*** (0.041) |
| Log Population×Ln(time) | 0.002*** (0.000) | 0.001*** (0.000) | 0.002*** (0.000) | 0.002*** (0.000) | 0.002*** (0.000) |
| Polity Level | -0.793 (0.623) | -0.781 (0.625) | -0.701 (0.608) | -0.754 (0.618) | -0.728 (0.609) |
| Polity Level×Ln(time) | 0.057 (0.042) | 0.056 (0.042) | 0.053 (0.040) | 0.055 (0.042) | 0.053 (0.041) |
| Mountainous Terrain | -0.060* (0.035) | -0.067* (0.036) | -0.077** (0.036) | -0.069* (0.036) | -0.068* (0.036) |
| Mountainous Terrain×Ln(time) | 0.004*** (0.001) | 0.004*** (0.001) | 0.004*** (0.001) | 0.004*** (0.001) | 0.004*** (0.001) |
| Territorial Conflict | 0.053 (0.094) | 0.051 (0.096) | 0.052 (0.097) | 0.048 (0.097) | 0.047 (0.096) |
| Total Interveners | | -0.005 (0.004) | -0.005 (0.004) | -0.004 (0.003) | -0.005 (0.004) |
| US–Russia Rivalry | | 0.234 (0.461) | 0.122 (0.386) | 0.328 (0.432) | 0.109 (0.483) |
| Balanced Intervention | | | | | -0.414*** (0.155) |
| AIC | 6037.831 | 6039.698 | 6026.726 | 6034.236 | 6035.838 |
| Num. events | 563 | 563 | 563 | 563 | 563 |
| Num. obs. | 2063 | 2063 | 2063 | 2063 | 2063 |

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$

imately 32% in Model 6, rising to 34% in Model 7 after controlling for total interveners and US–Russia rivalry, an effect that dwarfs that of non-rival CIDs, where each additional cross-side pairing reduces the hazard by only 3.6% in Model 6 and loses statistical significance once additional controls are included in Model 7. This disparity is further evident across alternative operationalizations: the logged rival CID measure in Model 9 is associated with a 58% reduction in the hazard of termination compared to only 19% for its non-rival counterpart, while the ratio measures in Model 8 show an even starker contrast, with rival CIDs associated with an 87% reduction against 45% for non-rival CIDs. The consistency of this pattern across all five models provides robust evidence for *H2* that the rivalry composition of CIDs is the central driver of the conflict-prolonging effect of competitive intervention

Figure 2: Comparison between the Effects of Rival and Non-rival CIDs



Note: The coefficient bars in the graph represent 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 2 summarizes the findings from Models 5 and 10, illustrating how the effect of CIDs on civil war duration varies with the presence of international rivalries. The left panel confirms that additional CIDs are associated with a progressively lower hazard of termination — from a ratio of 1.0 at zero dyads to roughly 0.72 at eight — suggesting that intensifying external competition makes conflicts steadily harder to resolve. The right panel reveals a

striking divergence: while non-rival CIDs (blue) produce only a modest decline in the hazard ratio, rival CIDs (red) drive it down sharply. The contrast is stark — at the average number of CIDs for two-sided interventions (6.3), non-rival dyads yield a hazard ratio of approximately 0.89, while rival dyads reduce it to around 0.13, indicating that rivalries produce a nearly seven-fold difference in the likelihood of civil war termination. Though confidence intervals for the rivalry condition widen considerably at higher dyad counts, the overall pattern is clear and statistically meaningful: rivalries among external interveners do not merely add to the conflict-prolonging effects of competitive intervention — they amplify them dramatically.

A potential concern with Cox specifications is the proportional hazards assumption, which requires that the effect of each covariate on the hazard of termination remain constant over time. We evaluate this assumption following [Box-Steffensmeier et al. \(2003\)](#) by examining Schoenfeld residuals for individual covariates and the model as a whole, which allows us to formally identify any covariates whose effects vary with time and adjust our specifications accordingly. The Schoenfeld residual tests indicate that our key explanatory variables, the count of CIDs in [Table 1](#) and the count of rival CIDs in [Table 2](#), satisfy the proportional hazards assumption. However, several control covariates violate the assumption in some specifications. To address these violations, we follow best practices for modeling non-proportional hazards ([Box-Steffensmeier et al., 2003](#); [Licht, 2011](#)) by interacting each offending variable with the log of time ($\ln(\text{time})$), and include them in our Cox Hazard models. Doing so allows us to evaluate whether and how the effects of these variables vary over time. Our findings for the key explanatory variables remain unchanged after incorporating these time interactions, indicating that our central results are not artifacts of the proportional hazards violation.⁶

⁶The baseline models without these corrections are reported in Appendix 1, where the results for *H1* and *H2* remain consistent across both specifications.

Robustness Check

We perform several robustness tests to assess the stability of our findings. First, we re-estimate our models using parametric survival models with Weibull and exponential distributions. Unlike the semi-parametric Cox model, which leaves the baseline hazard unspecified, these specifications impose explicit assumptions about how the hazard evolves over time, the exponential model assuming a constant hazard rate and the Weibull model allowing it to increase or decrease monotonically. This enables us to assess whether our estimates are sensitive to the assumed shape of the baseline hazard. As reported in Appendix 3.1, the sign and significance of our main variables are consistent across both specifications, with rival CIDs remaining the primary driver of conflict prolongation, indicating that our findings are not an artifact of the Cox model's flexibility in modeling time dependence.

Second, we also test our models using a random-effects (frailty) Cox model to account for unobserved heterogeneity across countries in civil war duration. This approach introduces a country-level random term to the baseline hazard, capturing time-invariant characteristics, such as institutional capacity, geographic constraints, or colonial history, that may jointly influence the likelihood of foreign intervention and conflict duration but are not fully captured by observable covariates. Unlike clustering standard errors, which adjusts inference without modeling the source of dependence, the frailty specification explicitly incorporates cross-country differences into the hazard structure, reducing omitted-variable bias that could confound our intervention estimates. As reported in Appendix 3.2, the results are consistent with our main findings, confirming that the conflict-prolonging effect of rival CIDs is not driven by unmodeled cross-country heterogeneity.

Third, we limit our sample to civil wars lasting ten years or less to ensure that the results are not driven by a small number of unusually long conflicts. Much longer conflicts are generally characterized by different dynamics, such as long-term stalemates, shifting external intervention patterns, or evolving political contexts that alter the incentives for both domestic

and external actors. These trends would be expected to produce biased estimated in duration models. Excluding such extreme cases makes the analysis more applicable to cases with similar parameter behavior over time. Appendix 3.3 presents the results based on this restricted sample of civil wars lasting less than ten years. The findings remain consistent with those from the full-sample analysis. The number of CIDs continues to exhibit a significant negative association with the hazard of civil war termination, and the disaggregated results show that rivalry CIDs retain a substantially larger negative effect compared to non-rivalry CIDs. The similarity of coefficient signs and significance levels across both samples demonstrates that the main findings are not driven by a few extreme and long-lasting wars.

Finally, a plausible concern is that anticipated long or intractable conflicts may themselves attract competing external interveners, rather than competitive intervention prolonging conflicts. We implement four complementary identification strategies to further address this concern. First, a Heckman selection model accounts for the possibility that unobserved factors driving selection into two-sided intervention are correlated with conflict duration. The inverse Mills ratio enters the Cox model as a control and is negative and highly significant, confirming that selection effects are present, yet rival CIDs retain a strong conflict-prolonging effect after correction, non-rival CIDs remain null, and the aggregate CID effect sustains its direction and marginal significance (Appendix 3.4). Second, we control for intervention timing by including the number of years between conflict onset and first intervention alongside an indicator for whether any intervention occurred. Each additional year before first intervention is associated with approximately a 19–21% reduction in the hazard of termination, yet the CID coefficients remain robust throughout, with rival CIDs continuing to exert a substantially larger conflict-prolonging effect than non-rival CIDs (Appendix 3.5). Third, we restrict the sample to dyad spells in which first intervention occurred within two or three years of conflict onset, supplemented by non-intervened dyads, isolating cases where the war's duration trajectory had not yet been revealed at the moment of intervention. Across both cutoffs, CID variables sustain negative and statistically significant effects (Appendix 3.6). Finally,

replacing baseline CID measures with their one-year lagged values, lagged rival CIDs retain a strong and statistically significant conflict-prolonging effect, lagged non-rival CIDs remain null, and the aggregate lagged CID measure is negative and marginally significant, the temporal precedence of these results limiting concerns about reverse causation (Appendix 3.7).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined how multiparty interventions shape the duration of civil wars by introducing the concept of a competitive intervener dyad (CID). Rather than treating foreign involvement as a binary condition of whether both sides receive support, our framework highlights that each pair of opposing interveners constitutes a distinct channel of competition that influences the bargaining process. We argue that as the number of CIDs increases, bargaining becomes more fragmented, information more distorted, and commitments less credible, thereby prolonging conflicts. Also, these effects become particularly stronger when the related states are marked with rivalry relationships. Our empirical analysis provides robust support for this claim. Drawing on global data from 1975 to 2017, we show that additional interveners in general reduce the likelihood of civil war termination, but the configuration of those interventions matters even more: each CID lowers the hazard of termination more substantially than a simple count of interveners. Moreover, we demonstrate that CIDs involving rival states exert especially strong prolonging effects, as preexisting hostility magnifies misperceptions and mistrust in civil war bargaining. These findings underscore that it is not just the presence of outside actors, but the structure of their competitive relationships, that conditions civil war trajectories.

Beyond the contributions discussed earlier, this paper speaks to two additional bodies of literature on civil wars. First, this paper advances the literature on civil war with the involvement of multiple foreign actors by shifting the analytical focus from the quantity of intervening states to the dyadic connections they form across opposing camps. Existing research has

established that a larger number of intervening states tends to prolong conflict by deepening bargaining problems between warring parties (Cunningham, 2006, 2010; Sawyer, Cunningham, & Reed, 2017; Maekawa, 2019). We do not dispute this finding, but demonstrate that it captures only part of the story. By introducing the concept of a CID, we demonstrate that two conflicts with identical intervener counts can differ substantially in their bargaining dynamics depending on how those interveners are configured against one another across the civil war divide. This shows that it is not the raw count of outside actors but the number of independent evaluative relationships formed between cross-camp interveners that drives the compounding of information and commitment problems, a claim our empirical results bear out, with CID count predicting conflict duration above and beyond the total number of interveners.

This paper also contributes to a growing body of research that applies network perspectives to the study of civil war and external intervention. Existing work in this tradition has examined how conflict dynamics are shaped by the network structure among relevant actors, though scholars have conceptualized these networks at different levels of aggregation. Some studies focus narrowly on the dyadic relationships between domestic combatants and their foreign supporters (Karlén, 2017; Tunç et al., 2025), while others adopt a broader view that encompasses the full web of relationships among governments, rebel groups, and external actors simultaneously (Jackson et al., 2020). Our paper does not cast its argument explicitly in network terms, but it shares a structural intuition with Aydin & Regan (2012), who examine how the balancing structure of intervention, defined by the relationships between domestic combatants and the external supporters backing opposing sides, shapes conflict dynamics. We build on and extend this tradition by moving beyond the question of whether external actors are connected across opposing sides at all, to asking how many such cross-camp dyadic relationships exist and what qualitative character, particularly whether they are defined by international rivalry, those relationships carry. Our argument also stands in a revealing relationship with Kinne & Maoz (2023), who show that structural imbalance within domestic political networks generates uncertainty that cascades outward into interstate relations. Our

findings point in the opposite direction: rather than domestic imbalance spilling into the international arena, we show that the structure of interstate competition among intervening states filters inward into civil war bargaining, compounding information and commitment problems domestically and thereby prolonging conflict.

Finally, our findings carry implications for policymakers and peacebuilders. While interventions are sometimes justified as tools to stabilize conflicts or encourage negotiations, our results caution that competitive interventions, especially those involving rival states, tend to have the opposite effect. Effective conflict management thus requires not only addressing the preferences of domestic combatants but also mitigating the competitive dynamics among external patrons. Cooperative frameworks that reduce interstate rivalry may be a necessary precondition for interventions to support peace rather than prolong war.

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